

Mezzotints

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SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS
ENGRAVED BY VALENTINE GREEN
(From the painting by Reynolds)

Mezzotints

THE fine art of engraving, accidentally discovered near the close of the first half of the fifteenth century by Tommaso Finiguerra, a Florentine goldsmith, has been developed to its present perfection through the practice of four distinct methods, and in the scale of their artistic excellence, the art of Mezzotint Engraving is ascribed to third position precedence being given to Etching and Line Engraving. Stipple, the fourth member, accepts without demur a relatively unimportant position in this artistic family, nor do her most ardent supporters urge the contention of her gentle charms against the nobler attributes of her more robust sister-arts.

The eager enthusiast, but recently come under the fascination exercised by the rich tones of mezzotint, is prone to meet this edict with some protest, and for his consideration be it said, that a careful analysis of their relative merits reveals the dominant characteristics of the mediums so widely divergent as to remove them from the field of rivalry, and

the impartial layman accepts without bitterness the decree issued by connoisseurs of fine prints.

Pre-eminently a creative art, its foremost claim to precedence, etching is generally assigned to premier rank. It is a medium characterized by great freedom and directness in expression, the mentality of the etcher being brought into direct communion with his public. It permits of the expression of great truths with great simplicity, a combination making for unequaled power.

Line engraving closely competes with etching for first honors, for while it is classed with the interpretative arts, it has been well proven under the test of original production. In its creative capacity, it was practiced by the early German and Italian masters, its brightest page illumined by no less a name than Albrecht Durer, whose graven work has never been surpassed. The dawn of a new era in its history broke with the days of Marcantonio Raimondi, and it has since been employed and numbered with the arts of reproduction, bringing it into close comparison with the purely interpretative process of Mezzotint. Of all systems, line engraving is the most



DIANA, VISCOUNTESS CROSBIE
ENGRAVED BY WILLIAM DICKINSON
(From the painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds)

exacting in its demands upon the engraver, long months and even years being given to the translation of a single plate. But in compensation for its exactions, the noble distinction of its masterpieces seems imparted no more by claims of artist and of subject than by the very dignity attendant on the medium itself. Line in its purity is the dominant characteristic of both etching and this method of engraving; the one, the free spontaneous line of creative thought, the other the beautiful and laborious precision of the engraver's burin.

Technically and in effect, the mezzotint process differs radically from either. It is dependent directly upon the manipulation of tone values, the range affording minute gradations from intense blacks of unrivalled depth and richness to whites of silver tone, exquisite in their purity. While the successful practice of mezzotint presupposes a clear knowledge of line, the precision of line is always in subservience, not the least test of the engraver depending on the subtile fusion of his masses, the brilliant contrasts of which he may avail, subdued and blended to one harmonious whole.

By most authorities, the mezzotint



LORD RICHARD CAVENDISH
ENGRAVED BY JOHN RAPHAEL SMITH
(From the painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds)

process is deemed pre-eminently suited to the translation of the painter's art. While it cannot attain to the supreme dignity of the line engraving, it possesses a fine nobleness of its own, less austere in its lyric beauty and for that reason more intimate in its appeal. While line engraving proves of greater power in the suggestion of form and excels perhaps in the rendering of fine qualities of texture, the warmer tones of mezzotint are more nearly suggestive to the eye of colour, and there is a grain in the broad sweep of its soft harmonies closely akin to the sweep of the painter's brush.

The invention of the mezzotint process is ascribed to Ludwig von Siegen, a Dutch officer of Hessians in the service of William the Sixth, Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel. An enthusiastic amateur, employing the known methods of the day, von Siegen experimented with his mediums, and the ultimate result of his endeavours proved the first mezzotint engraving, produced in 1642. Some twelve years later, he imparted the secret of his process to Prince Rupert, Duke of Bavaria, patron and amateur of the fine arts. The latter brought to the discovery that fine ardour of enthusiasm



THE RIGHT HON. LADY DOVER AND HER SON
ENGRAVED BY SAMUEL COUSINS
(From the painting by Sir Thos. Lawrence)

born of novelty, and on his return to England with the restoration of Charles the Second to the throne, his interests were actively engaged towards its perfection. His own productions proved of no mean value, the "Executioner of John the Baptist," a plate produced in 1658 being recognized as the early masterpiece of the art.

The new system of engraving, never developed to great extent upon the continent, found ready root in English soil. Essentially an interpretative medium, its interests allied and directly dependent upon the painter's art, the history of its development and its achievement runs parallel with the history of England's School of Painting, whose national expression takes such definite form in the art of portraiture.

The first dated English mezzotint, a portrait of Charles the Second, published in 1669, bears the name of William Sherwin, an engraver of but mediocre powers. Abraham Blooteling and Isaac Beckett spell more potent names among those practicing the art in its infancy. A native of Amsterdam, Blooteling during his sojourn in England, did much to develop the technicalities of the process,



GEORGE SPENCER, DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH
ENGRAVED BY JOHN JONES
(From the painting by George Romney)

his greatest gift, the invention of the "rocker," an instrument employed in preparing the ground of mezzotint, still in use. In addition, Blooteling produced some of the best plates of his period and gathered about him a talented group of Dutch engravers, who exerted a strong influence upon the art.

Isaac Beckett, known as the most popular mezzotinter of his day, filled the office of chief engraver to Sir Godfrey Kneller, later giving way to John Smith, a veritable master, the greatest produced by the seventeenth century, who was in turn succeeded by the refined translations of John Simon. A brief summary of the early period includes the names of Edward Luttrell, William Faithorne, Jr., Benjamin Lens and George White; nor may mention be omitted of John Faber, who between the years 1712 and 1756 produced no less than five hundred plates of great historical importance, bridging the days of Kneller and Sir Peter Lely with the brighter reign of Sir Joshua Reynolds and his illustrious contemporaries.

The decline of English art in the early half of the eighteenth century was speedily reflected upon the dependent art



FRANCES. DUCHESS OF RICHMOND
ENGRAVED BY THOMAS WATSON
(From the painting by Sir Peter Lely)

of mezzotint. Lacking pictorial inspiration in the immediate successors of Lely and of Kneller, it was only rescued from eclipse through the combined efforts of an earnest trio, Thomas Beard, John Brooks and Andrew Miller, who carried on the work in Dublin and there founded the famous School of Irish Mezzotint Engravers, whose pupils were to number some of the most illustrious names connected with its history.

The glorious revival of the art of English portraiture with the advent of Reynolds, Gainsborough and Romney towards the latter half of the century, presaged the highest development of mezzotint. James McArdell, the famed interpreter of Sir Joshua's earlier period, Richard Houston, identified so powerfully with the master-works of Rembrandt, Edward Fisher, James Watson, all pupils of the Irish school, conspicuous in its launching, proved names to conjure with. And with the further progress of the movement, such men as Richard Earlom, John Jones and William Pether; the Thomas Watson of "Lady Bampfylde" fame, and others equally as great, led on to Valentine Green, whose crowning achievement in his series of nine



A VISIT TO THE DONKEYS
ENGRAVED BY WILLIAM WARD
(*From the painting by George Morland*)

“standing beauties” after Reynolds, the most coveted prize in the collector’s range to-day, was to be more than equaled by the brilliant powers of John Raphael Smith, the representative master of them all.

The distinguished pupils of Smith numbered no less a genius than the young painter, J. M. W. Turner, but more notable in the interests of engraving were Samuel William Reynolds, and the brothers James and William Ward, translators of Morland’s period, men who worthily upheld the traditions of his noble epoch.

The new century brought its own band of important engravers in William Say, Charles Turner, David Lucas and Samuel Cousins, but while they brought brilliant gifts to its demands, conditions tended to its swift decline. The substitution of the steel plate induced by its increasing popularity, which permitted of the printing of large editions, distinctly inferior in quality and character to those produced on copper, was speedily conducive to its decadence. Nor did the charming art of Thomas Lawrence impel those higher expressions of which under powerful stimulus the medium is capable. With



A FLOWER PIECE
ENGRAVED BY RICHARD EARLOM
(From the painting by Van Huysum)

the death of Samuel Cousins, in 1887, mezzotint lost its last great exponent, and the public, deprived of novelty, turned a closer attention to an art threatened with extinction.

The radical change in the standard of appreciation accorded mezzotint and the amazing prices which brilliant proofs to-day command, are indicative of the important rôle which its existent masterpieces are destined to play in the future history of art. Capable of worthily transcribing the highest achievements of the brush, the engraving exists in practically an indestructible form and will preserve to future generations the superb masterpieces of the painter's art, which slowly but inevitably yield to the ravages of time. In this capacity they are being carefully guarded by National Museums of Fine Arts, who contend eagerly, with private collectors, for the choice of fine impressions.

The laborious exactions and attendant cost of Line Engraving have definitely numbered it with the lost arts. Mezzotint, threatened with a like oblivion by the long period of inactivity succeeding the successful days of Samuel Cousins, has recently been practiced to some

extent in England, largely under the capable supervision of Sir Frank Short. A more facile method than line, of strong popular appeal in its pictorial interest and consistent with the trend of modern art, its revival seems impelled to a share in that wide appreciation which the great living art of etching to-day enjoys.

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